



# Public safety communications: Failure is not an option

By Kevin Bruski and Carl Hotvedt, Your Turn - helenair.com | Posted: Wednesday, June 22, 2011 12:00 am  
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Less than three months remain until the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Come September, news organizations will devote enormous amounts of time and space to the story. Somewhere within the remembrance, there should be stories about how communications among public safety disciplines — law enforcement, fire services and the like — have evolved in the 10 years since Sept. 11.

Why does this matter? After all, when you report an emergency to your local 9-1-1 or other emergency call center, you get help, right?

Actually, the quality and timeliness of that help depends largely on communications: the ability of dispatchers to talk to responders and the ability of different responders to talk to each other across the landscape and, sometimes, across jurisdictional boundaries. Since Sept. 11, the federal government has invested billions of dollars nationwide to help public safety responders communicate with one another more effectively.

Tens of millions of those dollars have come to Montana, where they've financed communications towers and high-tech equipment intended to link local, state, tribal, federal and even private sector responders through a common "interoperable" radio system. Remarkably, all of that work was accomplished by a statewide association of local governments, tribal governments and select state agencies, working cooperatively — an approach unique among the 50 states.

The work that resulted has erased radio "dead spots" in many counties and allowed emergency responders to talk to one another in more effective ways. Federal dollars also made possible an important series of communications exercises across Montana's northern border in recent weeks. The reports from those exercises will be completed soon and will provide valuable direction for responders at all levels.

Change is coming, however. The statewide association that has overseen the development of this system is preparing to dissolve on June 30 and hand the reins over to new managers. To their credit, Gov. Brian Schweitzer and Attorney General Steve Bullock have pledged to do their part to keep the system viable. The Montana Department of Transportation and the Montana Highway Patrol have offered their technical expertise, for which they deserve thanks. In addition, the Montana Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association has offered to work in partnership with the state for the good of the system.

It's also worth noting that Gov. Schweitzer has expressed a desire for local governments to continue playing a prominent role in the statewide project. Already, several regional groups of

county and tribal governments (known as “consortia”) that pre-date the statewide association have announced their intention to remain active, even after the statewide group dissolves.

Additionally, Lewis and Clark and Richland Counties will manage multi million-dollar “zone controllers” which act as routing centers for radio transmissions across the system. Still, challenges remain. Maintenance work on the system must be done regularly and consistently. Technical standards must be met and operational procedures followed across the state. Responders who wish to use the system must be trained and their radios properly configured for that use. New federal initiatives for broadband communications may come into play. Finally, information about the system must be shared effectively among all potential users.

Addressing these challenges will require tremendous efforts from — and coordination among — many people across the state. Montana must succeed for the sake of our emergency responders and all of the citizens they serve and protect.

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